

Creating a Child Care Environment for Success

The design and layout of the physical environment; including interior finishes, outdoor spaces, selection of equipment, and room arrangement; have a profound impact on children's learning and behavior and on caregivers' ability to do their job. An effective environment supports children's interaction with space, materials and people. When the environment is designed properly, children have the freedom to move about safely while sampling a variety of curriculum activities with little intervention required by caregivers. Adults can then concentrate on developing activities, observing children, and meeting their individual needs. Effective environments help children feel invited and welcome to explore and learn.



Quality child care environments have:



- an age-appropriate, child centered curriculum;
- a variety of inviting equipment and play materials accessible to children;
- sufficient and uncluttered space for active play with an additional cozy space set aside for individual and quiet play;
- many colorful photographs and pictures including the children's own art work displayed at their eye level; and
- windows that provide natural light.

The motivation to interact with the environment is in all children as an intrinsic property of life, but the quality of the interactions is dependent upon the possibilities for engagement that the environment provides.¹ A child's development is directly linked to their ability to interact with their environment. Children develop an understanding of themselves through their interactions with events and materials outside themselves.²

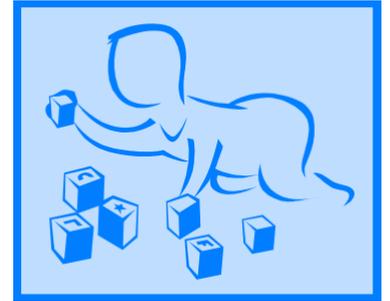


¹ (Olds, 1979, p 91.) Olds, A.R. (1979) Designing Developmentally Optimal Classrooms for Children. Baltimore University Park Press.

² (Piaget 1951) Play, Dreams and Imagination in Childhood.

The Play Space

The various interactions that occur in a classroom or family child care home are between children, staff, parents, and other adults, and among the children themselves. Space, schedules, and materials designed to support these interactions have a great impact on positive school readiness outcomes for children. A quality program must provide meet the three basic needs all children have:



- Protecting their health & safety;
- Developing positive relationships; and,
- Creating learning opportunities



The arrangement of space both indoors and outdoors, the materials and activities offered to the children, the supervision and interactions (including language) that occur in the classroom/ family child care home and the schedule of the day, including routines and activities, as well as support offered to parents and staff are all indicators of environmental quality. (ERS, March 2001)



The following ideas may help with organizing curriculum and physical space:

- Y Arrange the physical space to give children clear messages about what is expected.
- Y Organize routines that recognize the children's developmental abilities.
- Y Create challenging play opportunities that promote acceptable ways to behave.
- Y Base the design on the developmental needs of the children and accommodating their individual differences. Plan a developmentally appropriate curriculum based on the needs, interests, and abilities of the children.
- Y Integrate curriculum across traditional domains (music, art, language arts, gross motor and fine motor play)
- Y Make play and learning meaningful through relevant child hands-on activities.

- Y Plan and develop the learning environment so that it is full of concrete experiences.
- Y Provide options for children. Don't expect all children to be doing the same thing at the same time.
- Y Encourage children to make choices from a variety of available activities.
- Y Arrange space so children can easily move around and among the equipment and materials.
- Y Allow and encourage children to move about the room.
- Y Use developmentally appropriate child guidance and positive reinforcement strategies.

The arrangement of the environment plays a key role in guiding the behavior of young children. A poorly arranged physical setting actually sends messages which may trigger behavior such as aggressive play, running, or superficial interactions with toys and materials. Altering the physical space and layout of the room can eliminate such challenging behaviors. Observe children closely to determine what messages the physical environment is sending. If it appears that the space suggests undesirable behaviors to children --like running indoors--be willing to modify the arrangement of equipment and furnishings to send a different message.



Include cozy and well-defined play spaces to discourage running indoors. Wide-open areas tend to encourage children to use the space for rowdy, high-speed play.

Use low shelves or other borders (tape on the floor, area rugs, raised edges) to designate the size of each type of play space. The size of a play area tends to indicate how many children can play there.



A cozy book area, for example, should be very small and have a clear boundary if only one or two children are to play there. Other spaces, like block areas, can be larger because the nature of the play can handle a larger group.



Spend time demonstrating and explaining to children how new equipment should be used in order to prevent potential injuries and set the stage for its appropriate use

Children need quiet as well as active play opportunities. Designate areas for quiet play (like puzzles) by taking advantage of cozy spaces or adding carpet or pillows to absorb sound. Likewise, designate space for more active play (dramatic play, puppets, obstacle course) so that children have a variety of play experiences during the day. Be sure that the kinds of materials and the physical arrangement of the play spaces clearly give children the message of active versus quiet play and that the two areas are distinct and separate.



Use the physical arrangement of space to suggest play activities and give children cues that define the play you expect in that space. For example, if blocks are stored in a box without a clearly defined space for block play, it is likely that children will not see how to use these materials appropriately.



Family Child Care Homes



In family child care homes the environment the children use is typically the same as the family that lives in the home. A major reason that parents choose family child care is because they want their child in a home-like environment. There is a balance that family child care providers must reach when running their programs. Below are some factors to consider when thinking about your family child care environment.

- Use only space that is approved and licensed;
- Pay attention to household items that may be unsafe for your enrolled children;
- Make sure items such as outdoor grills, lawn and garden equipment, other hazardous equipment, household cleaners, and non-child care toys are all kept out of the way and are made inaccessible to children.
- Make sure all household members are aware that they need to be careful about their activities around child care children. They must be careful to close cabinets in the kitchen and close doors to other areas of the home that children should not have access too.
- Napping areas need to be safe and clear of items that are potential hazards. Be

aware of personal belongings and household items be dangerous to them if ingested or played with.

Always consider your ability to safely supervise and monitor children in your care. Pay particular attention to supporting the needs of your youngest children as well as enhancing the activities of those children that are older.

Create a Child Sanctuary

A child sanctuary is a small, semi enclosed space with room for only one or two children. The space should be visually isolated from other children but easily supervised by adults. There are no chairs and tables or special materials in the private area.

Like adults, children need breaks from large groups. When children are having a difficult time they might need a space for some privacy or to limit their contact with others. We must make a special effort to teach children how to take breaks and to pace their interactions. Well-designed private spaces can provide children with a safe refuge to re-focus their energy and gain self control.

Management of the Child Sanctuary

To effectively manage the child sanctuary make sure that the rules are clearly defined and that all the adults understand the purpose of the private space. Let children know that they can retreat to this spot to be. Teach children the strategies for politely telling another person that they do not wish to be disturbed when they are in the child sanctuary. Always remember that the child sanctuary is a place for refuge and re-grouping and should never be used as a timeout/punishment area.

Create Attractive, Sensory-Rich Activity Areas

Many early childhood professionals do a good job of adding interesting items to the play space, but it is also important to weed out items that have served their purpose. A cluttered, disorderly room is unpleasant and distracting. Eliminating clutter helps children focus on new material while decreasing the number of stimuli to which they must attend.

The list below highlights several low cost and practical ways to improve upon a focused centers environment:

Y Modify the lighting in the space. A skillful use of lighting is an indirect method of

child guidance.

- Y Install dimmer switches to control the intensity of the lighting different sections of the room.
- Y Modify ceiling height or floor level when possible to create spaces that are cozy, nurturing and child sized for comfort.
- Y Define an activity area by draping strips of cloth across and between dowel rods hung from the ceiling. This strategy softens an area of the room and actually makes the ceiling appear to be lower and is especially useful when a private, quiet, semi-enclosed activity area is desired

- Y Make rooms pleasant and attractive by creating visual, auditory, olfactory, and textural interest.
- Y Add well-chosen, inexpensive items such as paintings, posters, and safe green plants, photographs of the children, cloth hangings, and children's artwork.
- Y Use sound to create a pleasant environment. Children love to hear their favorite music when they arrive at your program.
- Y Think of the various ways to make the physical space pleasant using fragrance. Eliminate unpleasant odors by maintaining cleanliness.
- Y Carpet bare floors; cover bulletin boards with cork or burlap, or hang large collages made from cloth or other materials.
- Y Create a touch wall as an activity with the children to learn about various textures and materials.



Having Enough Materials

Young children are more likely to get involved in play when there is plenty of fun, challenging, and intriguing play materials. If the choice of materials closely matches the interests and the developmental abilities of the

children, it is more likely that each child will become engaged in constructive play activities. It is important to include a range of activities and toys for children of different ages and abilities. Sometimes this means adding or changing play materials to meet individual children's interests and developmental needs. It is also important to include enough materials to successfully engage all the children.

Children who fully engage in intriguing play activities require less adult intervention and are less likely to display inappropriate behaviors.

- Y It is easier for group of children to play together when there are multiples of the same items. It is not developmentally appropriate to expect very young children to share toys or other favorite materials.
- Y Children are more likely to learn to share when they're given more than enough similar items, such as having five or six shovels and buckets in the sandbox for the three or four children who typically play there.
- Y Consider the number and ages of children in the program when deciding how many types of activity areas to include.
- Y Arrange your space so that there is one-third more activity space than children, to allow children movement from one activity to another without waiting.
- Y Find out more about each child's individual interest by asking their parent.
- Y Look for non-traditional play experiences that might spark a child's interest.

When examining the programs equipment and materials check to see if they are:

- Age-appropriate;
- Safe and free of small chokeable parts;
- Colorful and attractive;
- Durable and free of breakable parts;
- Useful for teaching more than one skill or concept;
- Stimulating to the senses;
- Easily stored;
- Related to other equipment in use;
- Suited to existing or planned interest centers;
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- Building motor skills;
- Self-correcting or requiring a minimum of adult supervision;
- Facilitating the development of children's skills;
- Non-competitive and fostering cooperation;
- Extending play rather than limiting it;
- Able to promote active, not passive, involvement, and encourage imagination, not adult control.

Schedule Enough Time



In addition to having enough materials, young children need extended periods of play that are not interrupted by demands to hurry, clean up, or give someone else a turn. When children are seldom given opportunities to play with the blocks or swing until they are satisfied, they're less likely to be cooperative. Instead, their energy becomes focused on, "grabbing enough stuff, being the first in line, or refusing to get off the swing." They may be insecure about getting "enough" time to play out their imaginative play scheme. While some activities must be scheduled at specific times (it's your turn on the swing set or the parent who helps with lunch can only stay an hour), most of the day should be planned to provide a more flexible ebb and flow.

- Y When planning activities, recognize each child's pace and allow enough time for every child to finish at his or her own rate. When a child's pace is slower than others in the group, the child's sense of satisfaction may be disrupted if he is required to finish at a certain time. You'll also need to allow for children who finish quickly or want to come and go during activities.
- Y Plan the schedule by recognizing that, although there may be a few activities scheduled by the clock, time in an early childhood program should be arranged around children's interests. Children measure time by their interest level and not by the clock. When they're bored with an activity, they think it is time to be finished and when they are interested in reading a book or playing with a friend, they think it cannot be time for nap.
- Y Recognize that children gain satisfaction in the process as well as the finished

product. In dramatic play, for example, there is no finished product. Children's sense of satisfaction comes from being engaged in an imaginative play scheme where they explore the materials and experience the process.

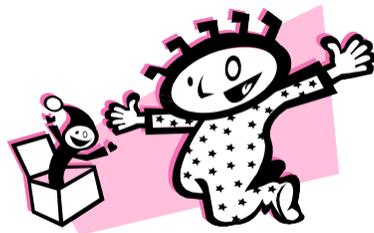
- Y Regularly schedule routines like mealtimes, outdoor play, or even going home sometimes make it impossible for child to finish an activity. Look for ways that children can return to the activity later. For example, allow the paint easel to stay up until the next morning or put a play-dough sculpture in an airtight container until later in the day.
- Y Allow the child to tell you when a particular project or some structure is completed. Some children enjoy returning to a project several days later. If, for example, a child wants to add to a picture hung on the wall, be sure that she has the opportunity to make additions or changes.
- Y Asking a child to play for five minutes with the toys so that someone else can take it away is not an effective way of setting up a successful schedule.
- Y Young children are focused on themselves and may not be able to think about another child's need to play.

Time is a tool that can be used to ensure that children feel satisfied. When a program matches children's sense of timing, you eliminate children's stress and the behaviors that result.. Plan Smooth Transitions

Many challenging behaviors occur during transitions from one activity to the next. Even when children have had plenty of time to play, it is difficult for them to move on to another activity. Young children benefit from a schedule that requires a limited number of transitions throughout the day. When a transition is necessary, it should be well-planned to allow enough time for children to participate at their own pace.

The following suggestions provide children with tools to understand routine and direct their own behavior during transitions.

- Y Establish a predictable routine or schedule so children know what will happen next. For example, children might naturally move to put on coats after lunch if outdoor play routinely follows lunch.
- Y Post a "picture schedule" where children can see it. You might use actual photographs of your play yard, lunch table, and play centers in sequential order or draw pictures to represent different parts of your day.
- Y Whenever possible, give children advance notice if the schedule is going to change. You can also move the pictures of picture schedule to represent the change.
- Y Give a few minutes' notice when activity is close to ending and a reminder of what is coming next. *"We will play outside a little bit longer. Then it will be time to rest."*
- Y Make transitions meaningful and fun (sing during cleanup, hop on one foot while coming in from recess).



Make Waiting

Scheduling a time

when children have nothing to do but wait is asking them to invent something to do---often something you wish they would not do! Standing in line to go outside, sitting idly at the table while others finish snack or waiting in line to wash hands are common examples of unnecessary waiting. . No one likes to wait idly. It is easy to picture the inappropriate behavior that results during long waits. However, any time there's a group of children there will inevitably be times when they have to wait.

Most “waiting” preschoolers are unable to stand still. Young children will fidget, move around, and find ways to interact with the person next to them to pass the time. They will hop, jump, play and touch each other. This kind of play is part of their communication and expression and it is appropriate.

The following ideas and suggestions can help in making waiting time productive

Time Productive

when children have nothing to

and fun for children.

Y Children do not need to do everything at the same time. Even circle time can be an optional activity. In fact, when two or more activities take place at the same time, no one has to wait their turn and the smaller groups promote better learning.

Y Arrange the schedule so that each activity flows into the next by setting out materials and allowing the children to join the new activity as they're ready. If snack is prepared and placed on the table, children can wash their hands and come to snack as they finish playing without waiting in line. Let children move from one activity to the next whenever they're ready., Change the responsibility of adults so that someone is always available to supervise children who are finishing or beginning the next activity.

If one adult helps some of the children begin a painting activity and the other stays with children who are still involved in other play areas, no one has to wait.

Y If staff are alone with children, they could set up a few child-directed activities close enough in proximity to supervise.

Y Give children something concrete to do whenever it is necessary to wait. While waiting for the bus, encourage children to sing, count the cars going by, or tell stories.

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